

Double Marginalization: Caste, Patriarchy and the Politics of Female Agency in Vijay Tendulkar's *Kanyadaan*

Dr. Iesha Sharma

Assistant Professor, Department of English, Govt. College for Women, Parade Ground,
Jammu, India.
ieshasharma3117@gmail.com

  <https://doi.org/10.26572/tc2613614>

Reviewed and accepted version first published on October 5, 2026

Abstract: Vijay Tendulkar's *Kanyadaan* is a significant modern Indian play that explores the complex relationship between caste, patriarchy, marriage, social reform and individual agency. The play centers on Jyoti Devalikar, a young woman belonging to an upper-caste Brahmin family, and her decision to marry Arun Athavale, a Dalit poet. Her father, Nath Devalikar, a liberal politician and social reformer, enthusiastically supports the marriage because he regards it as an opportunity to challenge the caste system. However, the consequences of the marriage expose the limitations of Nath's idealistic approach to social reform. Jyoti gradually finds herself trapped in a violent and oppressive marriage, while her father continues to interpret her experience through the framework of his ideological commitment to caste reform. This paper examines Jyoti's predicament through the concept of double marginalization. It argues that Jyoti occupies a complicated position within the play: she possesses caste privilege as an upper-caste woman but simultaneously experiences gendered marginalization as a daughter and wife. The play ultimately suggests that meaningful social transformation requires not only a challenge to caste but also recognition of individual autonomy and gender equality. Feminist theory helps clarify this argument by showing that women's oppression is produced through intersecting structures rather than through gender alone.

Keywords: caste, patriarchy, female agency, double marginalization, Dalit representation

Introduction

Indian drama has historically functioned as an important medium for representing social conflict and questioning established structures of power. Modern Indian dramatists have frequently used the stage to examine caste, class, gender, sexuality, political authority and the tensions produced by social transformation. Vijay Tendulkar occupies a significant place in this tradition. His dramatic works are characterized by their engagement with uncomfortable social realities and their refusal to provide simplistic solutions to complex human problems. Tendulkar's plays frequently portray individuals caught within structures larger than themselves. His dramatic situations reveal the contradictions between social ideals and actual human behaviour. *Kanyadaan* is particularly significant because it brings together caste and gender within the intimate institution of marriage. The play centers on the inter-caste marriage between Jyoti Devalikar, the daughter of Nath Devalikar, and Arun Athavale, a Dalit poet. Nath is a liberal politician and social reformer who believes strongly in the possibility of eliminating caste distinctions. When Jyoti announces her intention to marry Arun, Nath interprets her decision as an opportunity to put his ideals into practice. His approval is therefore influenced not only by affection for his daughter but also by his desire to challenge the caste system.

The marriage, however, does not produce the social transformation that Nath expects. Instead, it becomes a site of conflict, violence and ideological disillusionment. Arun carries the burden of caste oppression and social humiliation, while Jyoti enters the marriage with an idealistic belief in love and social equality. The two characters bring radically different social experiences into the relationship. Their marriage therefore becomes an encounter between different histories of privilege, deprivation, anger and expectation. This paper proposes that Jyoti's predicament can be understood through the concept of double marginalization. The term is used here to describe a situation in which an individual experiences disadvantage through intersecting structures of power. Jyoti's position is complicated because she is simultaneously located within the caste hierarchy and the gender hierarchy. As a Brahmin woman, she possesses caste privilege in relation to Arun. However, as a woman, daughter and wife, she remains subject to patriarchal expectations and male authority.

Vijay Tendulkar and the Social Dimension of His Drama

Vijay Tendulkar was one of the most influential figures of modern Indian theatre. His dramatic writing frequently focuses on the tensions and contradictions of Indian society. His plays address marriage, sexuality, violence, political power and social inequality. The original draft notes that Tendulkar's plays derive inspiration from real-life incidents and social upheavals and frequently explore the functioning of caste, class, gender and other forms of social domination. Feminist literary criticism similarly insists that private relationships are political. Kate Millett's influential formulation, "The personal is political," explains how domestic life can reproduce wider systems of authority (Sexual Politics 23). In *Kanyadaan*, the household is not separate from politics. Nath's reformist ideology enters the family, Arun's caste anger enters the marriage, and Jyoti's body becomes the place where social conflict is enacted. The domestic sphere therefore becomes a political space in which caste and patriarchy operate together.

In *Kanyadaan*, caste becomes particularly significant because the conflict occurs within the apparently private institution of marriage. The marriage between Jyoti and Arun demonstrates that social identities cannot simply be erased through personal affection. Their relationship carries the histories and expectations of the communities from which they come.

Kanyadaan: Marriage as a Social Experiment

The central conflict of *Kanyadaan* begins when Jyoti informs her parents of her decision to marry Arun Athavale. Jyoti belongs to a Brahmin family, while Arun is a Dalit youth with literary ambitions. The contrast between the two is immediately significant. Jyoti's announcement is not presented as a passive acceptance of family arrangements. She speaks with the confidence of someone who believes that her personal choice can challenge inherited social divisions. Her decision to marry Arun therefore has both emotional and political dimensions. Nath reacts differently from what might ordinarily be expected from an upper-caste father. Instead of rejecting the marriage, he welcomes it because it appears to correspond with his progressive political beliefs. His response is especially revealing because he does not merely say that Jyoti has the right to choose. He treats the proposed marriage as a test of his own principles. In effect, Jyoti's private decision becomes evidence of Nath's public reformism. This raises an important question: Is Jyoti choosing her marriage for herself, or does her father attach a larger ideological meaning to her choice?

Thus, the marriage becomes an experiment in which Jyoti is both participant and subject. The title itself anticipates this tension. *Kanyadaan* traditionally refers to the giving away of a daughter in marriage. However, Tendulkar's play complicates the idea by showing that even a daughter who appears to choose freely may still be placed within a structure controlled by men. A feminist reading makes this contradiction sharper. Mary Wollstonecraft argues that "women are, in fact, so much degraded by mistaken notions of female excellence" that they are denied the rational independence necessary for genuine freedom (A Vindication of the Rights of Woman 9). Jyoti's decision initially appears to affirm her rational autonomy, but Nath's response turns that autonomy into a resource for his reformist politics. Her freedom is celebrated precisely because it serves a male-defined social purpose.

Caste Conflict and the Limits of Liberal Reform

One of the major concerns of *Kanyadaan* is the failure of liberal idealism to adequately understand caste. Nath believes that caste prejudice can be challenged through individual action. His support for the marriage represents his confidence in progressive values. However, caste is shown to be much more deeply rooted than Nath imagines. Arun does not enter the marriage without his own history. He carries experiences of poverty, humiliation and exclusion. His response to upper-caste society is shaped by resentment and anger. The contrast between Arun's background and Nath's household is dramatized through Arun's discomfort in the Devalikar home. The house represents education, cultural confidence, political influence and material security. Arun's uneasiness is not simply personal shyness. It reflects his awareness that he has entered a social world that has historically excluded people like him. His presence in the house is therefore both a sign of social mobility and a reminder of the inequality that makes such mobility difficult.

The play also gives Arun a language of protest. His writing and autobiographical account express the suffering of Dalit communities and the humiliation produced by caste society. His anger is not invented by the marriage; it precedes it. When he confronts Nath's family, he brings with him memories of deprivation that cannot be neutralized by the family's liberal hospitality. This difference is essential to understanding the failure of the marriage. Nath assumes that personal contact can overcome structural inequality. However, the marriage brings the unequal histories of the two communities into direct contact. The play consequently questions the belief that social harmony can be achieved simply by crossing a caste boundary. The marriage

does not erase caste; rather, caste becomes more visible within the relationship. Arun's resentment, Jyoti's idealism and Nath's reformist enthusiasm all emerge from different positions within the caste structure.

A feminist analysis also asks who bears the cost of this symbolic transgression. Jyoti's body and emotional life become the medium through which Nath's reformist ideals are tested. Intersectional feminism, as Kimberlé Crenshaw explains, examines how "the intersection of racism and sexism factors into Black women's lives in ways that cannot be captured wholly by looking at the women's race or the women's gender dimensions of those experiences separately" ("Demarginalizing" 149). Although Crenshaw's formulation emerges from the context of race and gender in the United States, its method is useful here. Jyoti's experience cannot be understood through caste or gender alone. Her upper-caste identity gives her privilege, but her gender exposes her to forms of control that her caste status cannot prevent.

Jyoti as the Central Figure of Conflict

Jyoti is the most important character for understanding the relationship between caste and patriarchy in the play. At first, she appears to be an educated, confident and independent young woman. Her decision to marry Arun represents a rejection of conventional caste expectations. Her choice can therefore be interpreted as an assertion of female agency. She does not simply accept the marriage arranged or expected by her family. She chooses a partner from a socially different background. Her decision is especially significant because she does not wait for Nath to initiate the reformist gesture. She brings Arun into the family's consciousness and insists that her relationship be taken seriously. The early scenes surrounding her decision show that Jyoti is not merely being "given" in marriage. She speaks as a subject who believes that she can determine the direction of her life. Her confidence also exposes the limitations of Nath's interpretation: he may celebrate the marriage as his reformist achievement, but the initial act belongs to Jyoti.

Nath interprets her decision as a confirmation of his social ideals. Arun, meanwhile, gradually becomes controlling and violent within the marriage. Jyoti's personal decision thus becomes subject to two different forms of male authority. This is where the concept of double marginalization becomes particularly useful. Jyoti is not a straightforward victim of caste oppression because she comes from an upper-caste family. However, she is not completely privileged either. Her gender places her within a patriarchal structure. She is a daughter whose marriage becomes a matter of paternal ideology and a wife whose life becomes subject to her husband's authority. Her experience therefore demonstrates that privilege and marginalization can coexist. The tragedy of Jyoti's agency is that it is strongest at the moment of choosing but weakest when she must live with the consequences of that choice. Feminist theory helps distinguish between formal choice and substantive freedom. A woman may possess the legal or social right to choose a husband while lacking the material conditions necessary to live safely after that choice. This distinction is central to Jyoti's experience. Her initial decision is real, but the social structures surrounding marriage limit her ability to revise, resist or escape the consequences of that decision.

Double Marginalization: Caste and Patriarchy

The central concept of this paper is double marginalization. In the context of *Kanyadaan*, it refers to the way in which Jyoti's life is shaped by two intersecting systems: caste and patriarchy. The relationship between caste and gender is not simple. Jyoti occupies a privileged position as a member of the upper caste, while Arun occupies a

marginalized position because of his Dalit identity. However, within the marital relationship, the gender hierarchy becomes more significant. Arun, despite his marginalization within the caste system, acquires power as a husband. This creates an important reversal. Arun is oppressed by caste but exercises authority through gender. Jyoti is privileged through caste but experiences oppression through gender. Nath challenges caste hierarchy but continues to exercise paternal authority. These contradictions make the play particularly rich for an analysis of intersecting forms of power. The source draft observes that the play presents both the Dalit-upper-class conflict and the pathetic condition of women within patriarchal society. This suggests that caste and gender must be read together rather than separately. Jyoti's tragedy lies precisely in this intersection. Her caste privilege does not protect her from patriarchal violence. Her education does not guarantee autonomy. Her father's progressive politics does not necessarily translate into respect for her individual needs. She becomes the point at which different power structures meet.

Audre Lorde's statement that "There is no such thing as a single-issue struggle because we do not live single-issue lives" is particularly relevant to this analysis (Sister Outsider 138). Jyoti does not experience caste, gender, family and marriage as separate issues. They converge in her daily life. Her caste privilege cannot be detached from her gendered vulnerability, just as Arun's caste oppression cannot be separated from the masculine authority he exercises within the household.

Patriarchal Control and the Father-Daughter Relationship

Nath's relationship with Jyoti is central to the question of female agency. At first, he appears to be an unusually progressive father. He accepts his daughter's decision to marry a Dalit man and encourages the relationship. However, his support is not entirely free from patriarchal control. Nath sees the marriage as a demonstration of his own principles. The more he invests in the marriage as a social experiment, the more difficult it becomes for him to accept evidence that the experiment is failing. This becomes especially problematic when Jyoti begins to suffer. The source material indicates that Nath is aware of his daughter's plight but continues to resist the collapse of the marriage because he does not want his ideological project to fail. His response to Jyoti's return is therefore deeply revealing. Instead of immediately treating her as a woman in danger, he continues to ask what her experience means for the larger question of caste reform. His position reveals the paradox of liberal patriarchy. A father may support his daughter's freedom in theory while still controlling the meaning of that freedom. Nath permits Jyoti to make a choice, but he subsequently attaches his own political meaning to it. When the choice produces consequences that contradict his theory, he struggles to recognize the validity of Jyoti's experience.

Thus, Nath's liberalism remains incomplete because it does not fully recognize Jyoti as an autonomous individual. He supports her decision most enthusiastically when it confirms his ideals, but his support becomes uncertain when she asks to be protected from the consequences of the marriage. In this sense, Nath's reformism is conditional: he accepts Jyoti's freedom as long as it remains useful to his political imagination. Virginia Woolf's argument that "a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction" identifies the material conditions necessary for women's intellectual and personal independence (*A Room of One's Own* 4). This argument can be extended to Jyoti's situation. Jyoti may possess education and social status, but she lacks a secure space in which her decisions can exist independently of paternal and marital authority. Her dependence on the family and marriage makes her freedom vulnerable to male control.

Arun Athavale: Caste Oppression and Patriarchal Violence

Arun is perhaps the most controversial figure in the play. His character cannot be understood without recognizing the historical reality of caste oppression. He comes from a Dalit background and has experienced social exclusion and poverty. His literary work attempts to articulate the oppression suffered by marginalized communities. The source material notes that Arun's autobiography deals with oppression and the miserable condition of the poor and lower classes. His writing gives him a public voice, but it also reveals the anger produced by a society that has denied dignity to his community. However, the play introduces a disturbing contradiction: Arun speaks about oppression while simultaneously oppressing Jyoti. This contradiction is essential to Tendulkar's treatment of power.

The most important evidence of this transformation occurs when Jyoti returns to her parents after Arun has beaten her. Arun follows her and admits the assault. His admission is not presented as an abstract accusation; it is a confrontation with the consequences of his behaviour. He asks for forgiveness, but the request does not erase the violence. Instead, it reveals the unstable cycle through which violence, remorse and reconciliation become connected. The scene is especially disturbing because Arun's public identity as a writer of oppression contrasts with his private conduct as a husband. The man who can describe the suffering of the poor and lower classes becomes the man who inflicts suffering on Jyoti. Tendulkar does not use this contradiction to discredit the reality of caste oppression. Rather, he shows that political victimhood does not automatically produce ethical conduct in intimate relationships. His violence should not, however, be interpreted as an inherent characteristic of Dalit identity. Such an interpretation would reproduce the very stereotypes that the play seeks to expose. Instead, his behaviour can be understood as part of the complex relationship between social humiliation, anger, masculinity and power. Tendulkar thereby creates an uncomfortable paradox: the victim of one oppressive system becomes capable of reproducing oppression within another social relationship. Arun's violence also exposes the inadequacy of Nath's reformist framework. Nath wants to see Arun primarily as the representative of a historically oppressed community and the marriage as a symbol of caste reconciliation. However, Arun is not only a social category. He is also an individual whose anger, insecurity and masculinity affect the marriage. By reducing him to the role of a reformist symbol, Nath fails to anticipate the possibility that Arun may exercise power destructively.

Marriage and the Patriarchal Meaning of *Kanyadaan*

The title *Kanyadaan* itself carries significant cultural meaning. The traditional concept of *kanyadaan* involves the giving of a daughter in marriage. The daughter becomes associated with the authority of the father and subsequently with the authority of the husband. Tendulkar's title therefore becomes ironic. Jyoti initially appears to challenge traditional expectations by choosing her own husband. She refuses to allow caste boundaries to determine her personal relationship. However, she ultimately moves from one structure of male authority into another. As a daughter, she becomes part of Nath's social experiment. As a wife, she becomes subject to Arun's authority. Her movement from father to husband therefore does not necessarily represent movement from patriarchy to freedom. The play consequently questions whether formal choice is sufficient for genuine agency. A woman may be allowed to choose her husband and still lack control over her subsequent life. This distinction between choice and sustained agency is central to understanding Jyoti's character. The title also suggests that Jyoti is treated as an object of exchange even when the exchange is

described in progressive language. Traditional patriarchy gives the daughter to the husband; Nath's liberalism appears to give her to the cause of social reform. In both cases, the woman's life is made to serve a male-defined purpose. The difference is that Nath's language is modern and egalitarian, while the underlying structure of appropriation remains. Feminist criticism exposes this continuity between traditional and modern forms of control. The language of consent does not automatically eliminate patriarchy if the woman's decision is still valued primarily for what it represents to men. Jyoti's marriage appears voluntary, but its meaning is repeatedly determined by male authority. Her life is not simply transferred from father to husband; it is also transferred from one ideological framework to another.

Jyoti's Agency and Her Final Departure

Jyoti's final decision to leave her parental home is one of the most significant moments in the play. Her departure can be interpreted as the tragic consequence of a failed marriage, but it can also be read as a final act of agency. Throughout the play, Jyoti's identity is defined by others. Nath sees her as the daughter who can demonstrate his commitment to social reform. Arun sees her through the complicated lens of caste resentment and marital authority. By leaving, Jyoti refuses to remain permanently defined by these male-centered interpretations. The source material states that Jyoti ultimately leaves home and that the play ends without offering a satisfactory resolution to the future of her marriage. The unresolved ending is significant. Tendulkar does not provide a simple emancipatory conclusion. Jyoti's departure does not guarantee happiness or freedom.

Nevertheless, it represents a refusal to remain passively trapped. Her agency therefore exists in a tragic form. She cannot completely control the circumstances of her life, but she can reject a situation that denies her dignity. The final movement is important because Jyoti's action is no longer primarily a gesture for someone else's political project. Her marriage had been interpreted by Nath as a challenge to caste and by Arun as a relationship in which he could assert authority. Her departure, by contrast, is directed toward preserving herself. It does not solve the social problem, but it interrupts the assumption that she must continue sacrificing herself to prove the validity of a reformist ideal. Her departure should not be romanticized. She leaves without a secure alternative and without the assurance that society will recognize her decision as legitimate. However, the absence of a guaranteed future does not make the act meaningless. It shows that agency may consist not in achieving complete freedom but in refusing continued submission. From a feminist perspective, this refusal is significant because it reclaims the body and life that have been treated as instruments of male projects. Jyoti's departure does not erase the violence she has experienced, but it rejects the demand that she remains available for reconciliation, reform or ideological justification.

Conclusion

Vijay Tendulkar's *Kanyadaan* is a complex exploration of caste, patriarchy, marriage and social reform. The play challenges the assumption that progressive intentions necessarily produce progressive outcomes. Nath Devalikar sincerely wishes to challenge caste discrimination, but his ideological commitment gradually prevents him from adequately recognizing his daughter's suffering. Arun is himself a victim of caste oppression, yet he becomes capable of exercising patriarchal violence within his marriage. Jyoti, meanwhile, becomes caught between these competing forms of power. The concept of double marginalization provides an effective framework for understanding Jyoti's position. She enjoys caste privilege as an upper-caste woman, but

she is simultaneously marginalized through gender. Her experience demonstrates that social identity cannot be understood through a single category. Caste and gender intersect in complicated ways, producing different forms of privilege and disadvantage.

Works Cited

Crenshaw, Kimberlé. "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics." University of Chicago Legal Forum, 1989, pp. 139–167.

Lorde, Audre. *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*. Crossing Press, 1984.

Millett, Kate. *Sexual Politics*. Doubleday, 1970.

Tendulkar, Vijay. *Kanyadaan*. Translated by Gowri Ramnarayan, Oxford University Press, 1996.

Wollstonecraft, Mary. *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. Edited by Carol H. Poston, W. W. Norton, 1975.

Woolf, Virginia. *A Room of One's Own*. Harcourt, 1929.